



## Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

*The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema: Essays by Martin Walsh* by Martin Walsh; Keith M. Griffiths

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on the colors of the essays under discussion. He gradually initiates the reader into the more arduous language and concepts; he invites us to wade slowly into the semiotic sea rather than prod us into a quick forbidding plunge. Caughey is, in sum, an informed, impartial, and considerate guide through the critical labyrinth.

—ROBERT STAM

## THE BRECHTIAN ASPECT OF RADICAL CINEMA Essays by Martin Walsh

Edited by and with introduction by Keith M. Griffiths. British Film Institute, 1981.  
Available from NY Zoetrope, \$14.50.

This new volume published by the BFI is a collection of essays written by Martin Walsh in the seventies for a variety of film journals including *JumpCut*, *Camera Obscura*, *Take One*, *Screen* and *After Image*. Walsh's untimely death in 1977 in a bicycling accident did not allow him to connect these essays into a coherent unit. However, Keith Griffiths's project of assembling these pieces seems to have been well-founded as attests an outline found in Walsh's papers and included here. The series of articles has then been given some kind of flow and thesis.

That thesis is one which has been explored by a number of writers in the sixties and seventies concerning the applicability of Brechtian thought to cinematic praxis. It is well-summarized by Walsh in the lead essay, "The Complex Seer: Brecht and the Film," in which he delineates carefully four areas of investigation which pertain to Brecht's involvement with film. The first is Brecht's use of cinema within the theatrical performance context, the second, Brecht's own unhappy experiences with cinematic practice (i.e., the *Three Penny Opera* lawsuits, etc.). The third is the link made by Brecht between Chaplin and Eisenstein and the final is that which would explore how contemporary film-makers have consciously attempted to bring to film the different theories Brecht had discussed in terms of theater.

It is clearly the last of these which Walsh seems to favor as exemplified in the rest of the collection. Brecht's emphasis on an active spectator with a concept of process in mind is analyzed extensively in the work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Four articles are devoted to their work and form the central core

of the book. Indeed, Walsh's book must not only serve the cause of Brechtianism, but that of expanding upon the out-of-date Richard Roud monograph on Straub/Huillet. Three other essays are included: an analysis of humor in Medvedkin's *Happiness*, a lengthy review of Losey's production of Brecht's *Galileo* for the American Film Theater, and an edited transcript of conversations with Jean-Pierre Gorin recorded in 1974.

Brecht's theories are not without their own contradictions, yet their rallying point is that of a concept of "alienation" or "distanciation." It is Brecht's hope to fashion a new theater where spectators are not hidden within the security of their seats, but one where those spectators are confronted with intellectual concepts which relate to their own lives. Theater should no longer be a purely emotional process, but an intellectual process with a marked emphasis on the struggle ahead, social change, and the actual work of the actors. Walsh's project is to gauge to what extent these theories can be and have been applied to film.

Brecht's own attempts at making this change into another practice having failed, it is then up to another generation of "cultural workers" to make the transition. Walsh emphasizes that Brecht is not the only figure in this theorization, but that he must be seen in the overall context of the avant-garde movements of the twenties in both the Soviet Union and in Germany. It is Walsh's contention that repression in both countries led to a destruction of the movements so that while Medvedkin, Meyerhold, Dziga Vertov, Eisenstein and many others contributed to them, it is often Brecht who is now seen as the representative of the group. This position was also supported by *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the late sixties with special issues dealing at length with the whole of the Soviet avant-garde and by Jean-Luc Godard's formation of the Dziga Vertov group during the same period.

It is Straub/Huillet who characterize for Walsh the most patent conscious effort at implementing these theories in cinema. Not only have they and others discussed their films as specifically relating to Brecht, but *History Lessons* is directly based on a work by Brecht (*The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar*). The aesthetic of the long take, the frequent quotations and use of black leader, the insistence on direct sound recording, all are seen in

Straub/Huillet's films as attempts to bring to the film spectator the same alienation effect sought by Brecht for the theater spectator.

Needless to say, such an uncompromising position by these film-makers has resulted in broad attacks from a number of directions. The classic distribution-exhibition structure does not recognize the validity of these films and often levels charges of incompetence at its creators (see Godard's statements on *Les Carabiniers* in *Godard on Godard*). The purely formalist avant-garde whose interests lie outside political concerns denounces the radical content and form of these films while continuing to support a myth of uncommitted artists. Political film-makers whose work stays at the level of content, rejecting the need for revolutionary form, dismiss them as individualistic experiments and raise charges of subjectivism, the same charges which were levelled at Eisenstein and which led to his forced abandonment of experimentation. But the line is unflagging. Walsh admits that Straub/Huillet's films, Schoenberg's music and Brecht's theater cannot be seen as "populist." In essence, the filmmaker must not concede to dominant form simply because this form will allegedly reach more people.

It must also be said that the essays in this volume are readings of works which consciously see themselves within this Brechtian theoretical position. While many film reviews attempt to "save" certain films by invoking Brechtian theories, many of these attempts are but pandering to the concepts and in fact act as a co-optation of Brecht's very theories. Thus a need emerges for a constant shifting of actualization of these theories in relationship to dominant film-making.

The group of essays makes for pleasant reading. Walsh's style is accessible and his discussion of Brecht never too ephemeral. The only sour note, the price tag. People have mentioned the unusually high prices of the BFI series, which might be attributed to its distributor in the US. Whatever the reason, the \$14.50 price tag seems a little steep.

—FABRICE ZIOLKOWSKI

## REALISM AND THE CINEMA

Edited by Christopher Williams. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

Christopher Williams's critical anthology presents the writings of more than a score of critics and filmmakers—from Sergei Eisenstein to Jean-Louis Comolli—who have addressed themselves to the vexed question of cinematic realism. Although the book performs a real service by compiling a number of excellent articles, including many that had not been readily accessible to Anglo-American readers, and although Williams's commentary is not unintelligent, it is marred by serious problems of format and conception. The whirlwind tour of this challenging subject leaves the reader bewildered, feeling rather like a stranger lost in the suburbs of a sprawling megalopolis and desperately searching for a center.

The book's basic organizational map, first of all, is somewhat baffling. The title of the first chapter—"Realist Positions"—leads us to expect a contrasting "Anti-Realist Positions," but instead we are given "Discussions of Flaherty." The titles of the last two chapters—"Forms and Ideologies" and "Aesthetics and Technology"—seem hopelessly vague. Why, we wonder, are "Aesthetics and Technology" grouped together, and why at the end rather than the beginning of the book? The dizzying effect of this erratic itinerary is compounded by a constant shuttling back and forth in time—from a sixties *Cinethique* text to twenties Epstein, from thirties Grierson to the Soviet twenties—which induces a kind of temporal jetlag in the reader. Williams offers us neither straightforward chronology nor an intelligent mapping out of problematic terms such as: "realism," "naturalism," "illusionism," "critical realism," "socialist realism." Instead, the reader, more confused at the end than at the beginning, loses all sense of the intellectual topography.

At times *Realism and the Cinema* seems less an anthology than an essay in which the quoted passages are unusually lengthy. Since the typeface used for the quoted authors is irritatingly similar to that used for Williams's commentary, we often lose track of exactly who is speaking. The selections themselves seem somewhat arbitrary, and their length often bears little proportion to their relevance. Bazin's "William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Mise-en-